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Two statements have recently come from Scotland which contain interesting testimony about the evangelistic value of religious broadcasting. They are reproduced below.

"WORD FOR LIVING" SOUND BROADCASTS

made in Scotland in January, 1958

From a statement by
The Rev. W.A. Smellie, Minister of the Kirk of St. John,
Perth, Chairman of the "Tell Scotland" Movement.

The assignment was that the minister and a group of church members should assume responsibility for four Sunday evening broadcasts which, broadly speaking, would follow the pattern already established in the Scottish Home Service "Word for Living" programmes; i.e. the central substance of each programme would be a report by members of the group on what it had meant for them (and for other members) to live for a week in direct obedience to a selected passage from the Bible, regarding the understanding of which exposition had been made and common agreement reached prior to the week's commencement. The minister was to be responsible for the preparatory exposition, and for a layout of the same in the actual broadcast.

In personnel the group which ultimately participated was a real cross-section of the congregation: housewives of diverse "social" grades, women office-workers; a doctor; a lawyer; two engineers; a teacher; a manager of a large insurance branch-office; a managing director of a firm of motor-engineers and motor area-distributors, inter alios.

As is apparent in the scripts, the normal Order was: - (i) General Introduction by minister; (ii) Hymn; (iii) Prayer; (iv) Exposition of passage by minister; (v) Contributions (normally four in number) from lay members of the group; (vi) Prayers - A. Supplications appropriate to the discipline and its experience; and B. Intercessions; (vii) Hymn; (viii) Blessing. (Lay "contributions" were approximately four minutes each.)

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What did the group think about the experience? The following quotations from members of the group are indicative:

"Within the group there was a great deal of preliminary doubt regarding the worthwhileness of the undertaking, for, of course, this kind of thing cannot be done except at real personal cost and with much misgiving. All that has been utterly destroyed by the responses received." (See below)

"Nor is this by any means all. The unanimous testimony of those involved in this assignment is that - as by a miracle of which they had long since abandoned hope - they have been delivered from small-mindedness, and projected into a radical confrontation of the realities of Christian obedience such as they have never, by a very long way, experienced in all their previous profession of the Faith. This, surely, represents something by which any Christian congregation might be instructed. It is a letter written as a result of the group's (as they would insist) feeble witness which says: 'What terrible mischief can be done with one's tongue and how harsh are people's judgments!'"

What did listeners think? Some of the reactions, from both Scotland and England, are as follows:

"During the period of the broadcasts I reckon it is literally true that everyone I met within my own community of Perth spoke about the programmes: within the area of their origin they were a 'must' for everyone in the least interested in the Church, and, I would say, for a great many who were not so interested; this, to some extent, would be due to the fact that some of the lay people speaking into the mike might be notable in possessing no great local reputation for traditional and conventional piety.... The undertaking was pabulum for the barber's garrulity..."

"Anything down to brass tacks is so unusual, but it is the only way... People are demanding something concrete..."

"This is certainly a step forward in the progress of Christian living..."

"When I turned on the radio I had been feeling bitter despair, but what was said seemed so closely to apply to my situation..."

"Came our second programme, in which our Word had been 'Blessed are the merciful'. On this occasion, two of the lay folk again testified of how this Word had served them as wholesome light to guide them in an exercise in what might be called sanctified introspection, and how it had enabled them to a more graceful and charitable bearing in their homes. But two others, not without encouragement from myself, chose, rather, to discuss together what it had meant for them, as business directors, to juxtapose this Beatitude to their week's personal involvement in all the ambiguities of wordly commerce. (See Script No.2)"

A final comment would be that the only tokens we have by which to judge the worthwhileness of what was attempted are (1) the common talk of the town and (2) letters received. From these one would deduce that in the main those interested were (1) Aged and housebound folk; (2) Church members - many of whom, as has been stated - seemed to be gladly astonished to think that this kind of thing was being attempted within the Church at all; and (3) People on the Christian fringe. I do not have the letters by me as I write but my recollection is that only two or three came from people right outside the influence of the Church, whether in hostility or indifference. Even these,

I would say, were piqued (at the least estimate) by what had been substantial evidence to show that we made any deep or widespread impression on the "Churchless millions".

Report by the Rev. Dr. William Barclay on his month of People's Services January 1958

The last time I had the responsibility of taking the People's Service I wrote to you about the quite extraordinary feeling of fellowship which the service had developed, at least for me. This time that feeling was accentuated. This time letters began arriving before the service from people who had seen that I was to preach; and the letters assured me of the interest and of the prayers of those who wrote. This to me was a quite extraordinary help. To be quite frank, I still hate broadcasting. I get into a state of complete nerves and fear. But, when I was preparing on the first Saturday night, and dreading the next day, I read over these letters which had come that week - not very many of them - there isn't time for many - about half a dozen - and it made to me a very big difference to know that people unknown to me except by name were praying for me.

Of the services themselves I can only say that there is a feeling of a real fellowship now which is even more real than in many a seen congregation.

May I say one thing about method? I decided that I would try an experiment by doing the broadcast sitting down at a table. I thought that that would give a relaxation that standing does not give. I think that it was successful. It meant that I could talk freely and simply into the microphone. And I found that sitting down I was even less dependent on the written manuscript and was able to talk much more intimately. This is of course a purely personal matter.

While I am on the service itself there are two things that I would wish to raise.

(a) In spite of official prohibition I still think that a half minute of music is the best introduction to the service. I believe that the objection is that it makes it sound like a Church service. Oddly enough, that, I believe, is precisely what the listener wants it to sound like - although he does not want it to sound like the Church service he ordinarily knows. He wants a Church service but a Church service which is a People's service. I am quite sure that it is a mistake to take out the half minute of music. Please don't think that I am registering a protest. This is nothing other than a personal opinion - based, however, on the reactions of some letters.

(b) I believe that there is a certain disfavour to "running over" time. Now I ran over time in two services - and I do want to say that I did it deliberately. I feel that there is nothing wrong to going out to the words of a hymn. The blessing can be put into the last prayer; and the hymn makes a good outgoing. There can be few greater things than to leave people with the great words of a great hymn as a close. Again, this is nothing other than a personal opinion; and I am well aware of the "liturgical" reasons against it.

Letters: I received rather more than 600 letters. As usual less than half a dozen from Scotland. They came mainly from the following districts - Yorkshire, and Lancashire, the Midlands (most of all) London, and a surprising number from Devon, Somerset, and Cornwall. They came from every denomination - Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, quite a few Salvation Army, and many Anglicans. There were no fewer than four from Anglican ministers, one of whom asked for the scripts - and who has since written that he proposes to preach them!

Certain letters stand out in my mind. May I say that I am well aware of the distinct possibility of self-dramatisation, and of neurotics. But the feel of them was genuine. There were many from people with heart-breaking personal problems; there were a number from people about to go into hospital (one from a woman who was actually waiting for the ambulance). One girl was moved to make contact with her family with whom she had quarrelled just after the war, and from whom she had never heard since. She did at once; they replied at once; and she wrote to tell me so. One was from a woman of fifty whose husband had died; she sought comfort and forgetfulness in drink. She wrote that she had resolved to stop. Three professed actual conversion. One came from a man who says that he was about to commit suicide a d who was stopped. Many wished for help in prayer and Bible reading. Let me repeat - I know the necessary deductions which must be made; but I am amazed and humbled at the astonishing repercussions of this service. I know that husbands and wives and families are brought together; and that those in very terrible peril are helped. I know this to be true, because sometimes when I have been preaching in England people have come to me after the service to tell me that they were the people who had written.

I want to make the same point as I made last time. For one person who commented on the services, twenty commented on the prayers in the service. There was request after request for them. The last time I wrote about the service I said that I was convinced there was a need for a brief time of weekly Intercessory Prayer on the wireless. I am more than ever convinced of that. There must be thousands of people who are longing for simple direct concrete interecession in which they feel that they are remembered.

Another point - I have come to feel that the BBC might well do more on the publication side on the religious part of the work. It would help the preacher if there were more copies of the service available for distribution. I forgot to say that there were four letters from Holland. In Holland it appears that the religious services - or some of them - can be bought in pamphlet form. But I can't help feeling that there is a great untouched territory here. I know there are plenty Bible reading and religious works available - but not for the people who listen to the People's Service.

I do not think that the Television Services can ever fully take the place of these sound services. One of the values is that the preacher is only a voice. That is precisely why so many will take their troubles to him.

One final word - I have no doubt that the listening public to the People's Service is now a real congregation. And therefore there is more and more the need that the services should have a definitely teaching angle. I know that they already have that; but it could be developed.